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Essay: Academic Identities for the 21st Century

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Abstract

The Academic Identities for the 21st Century Conference sought time and space to explore ways of being in a contemporary university sector beset by challenges. As visions for 'the university' become increasingly diversified, technologies impact, and hybrid roles emerge, it is apposite to question the conditions of work and study in higher education. For staff and students alike, the notion of destabilisation can frame identities in response to changes in institutional priorities. Accompanying such destabilisation, however, are creative, resilient and autonomous appeals to some fundamental values that have long characterised academic life. The underlying spirit of the conference was one of hope. No matter how hostile some contemporary rhetoric, many still aspire to a higher education that cares, inspires and empowers. The review below elaborates on these themes through summaries of some of the work presented. Its aim is to convey an impression of the conference to those unable to attend, and perhaps to provoke reflection on what it means to work and study in the university of the 21st century.

Keywords: identities; student experience; academic practice; care; destabilisation; resilience.

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Review

Can we re-imagine academic life? A cursory glance at the British higher education trade press gives us headlines bemoaning standards, worries over global and institutional competitiveness, and concerns about practices from marking to contact hours. Despite long-cherished notions of academic freedom and autonomy, all would seem to be doom and gloom. How, in what appear to be such depressing circumstances, can we construct meaningful, positive academic identities? This conference sought to address some questions central to understanding academic life in its current guise and looking towards a re-imagined future. The fundamental premise behind the conference

theme, and its division into the four strands of: academics' identities, learner identities, virtual identities and leadership and management identities, was a closer examination of the current (and potential future) conditions of working and studying in the university. The aim, in the call for papers was, through the use of some perhaps provocative claims and questions, to encourage challenging contributions to renew and extend our thinking. I was hoping for challenges to orthodoxies too, and maybe challenges to disciplinary ways of thinking about identities. (Declaration: I was the conference chair, so this review is hardly written from a neutral standpoint).

The three keynotes for the conference were chosen for these reasons too, and all challenged convention and everyday rhetoric in both form and substance. Sue Clegg, head of the Centre for Research into Higher Education, Leeds Metropolitan University, opened the conference with a talk entitled '*Academic Identities – Who Cares?*' Many things stood out for me in this talk, but I will focus on just three. First, that 'care' seems to be a mostly absent concept in our thinking, writing and talk about life in universities, and how this lack damages us all. A vivid illustration came from her use of students' talk – about how feeling cared for (or not) impacted on their academic work. Real care, Sue suggested, has instead been substituted by a concern for 'due care', its very antithesis. Next came a reminder about how care is still gendered, and how this feeds into a differential development of the identities that male and female academics enact. And, of course, the difference in worth that the academy still accords to such roles and identities. Rewards still accrue to those who do not do the 'caring', making a mockery perhaps, of policy intentions (in the UK at least) to put the student experience at the heart of university life. There was, however, a final uplifting message: notwithstanding the absence of notions of care, and its lack of reward, many academics do still care, and often will go to extraordinary lengths to extend care – to their colleagues and their students. Care is a resilient value that, despite the pressures, remains fundamental to many in academic life. Resilience is a theme that will be returned to below, as that element of the substance of Sue's talk clearly resonated with many other contributions. But in talking about the need for care in academic life, Sue extended the very same to her audience. Taking less time than she needed for her keynote address, there followed a productive and generous interaction with the audience, a very real effort to draw people in through a far more engaged invitation to dialogue than the usual perfunctory question and answer session.

Chris Jones, reader in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University was our second keynote speaker. He took us on a delightful autobiographical journey at the start of his talk, titled '*Who are you? Technology, Networks, Identities*' that, I thought, connected well with the audience. Some of this history I knew, some I didn't. But Chris's point was to show how we construct such coherent narratives in a post-hoc fashion. There were no lies, he assured us, but there may be smoothing – and the dangers that might pose for constructing perceived or ideal identities for others. The substance of Chris's talk was to challenge the potentially dangerous national and institutional rhetoric around 'digital natives', the default identity ascribed to new students in the 21st century. He also attempted to draw out some implications of the increasing prevalence of networked technologies for academics' identities and ways of working in this environment. But to the students: they are commonly portrayed as at home with all forms of technology, comfortable multi-tasking, and clamouring for change in higher education pedagogies. Drawing on data from his recent 'Net Generation' project, Chris showed that there is still a good deal of variation within age groups (Net Gens being defined as 25 and under) as well as between them. For all the recent talk of virtual campuses being where learning is at in the 21st century, Chris's data showed lower use of ICTs

amongst distance learners than those attending university full-time, face-to-face. Gender differentiation in the use of ICTs remains. My take home message from Chris's talk was that current prominent assumptions are flawed: actual evidence shows – rather than perpetual multi-tasking – a variety of strategies for dealing with networked technologies, including turning them off. A lesson also for hard-pressed academics, perhaps, who are coming under increasing pressure to develop and attend to 24/7 networking because the rhetoric says that's what their students want. Chris showed, in his usual, warm, humorous style that there is far more to ponder in the development of virtual identities within a university context than is commonly acknowledged.

The final keynote speaker was Tai Peseta, senior lecturer from the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Tai took the opportunity to exemplify in the form of her talk the substance of it: it was an invitation to consider whether we can not only 'do' identity differently (by reflecting more substantially on the values and commitments that often lay beneath the identities we perform publicly), but also to report the fruits of our labours – whether written or oral – in a more honest fashion. She chose the medium of personal essay for her talk entitled '*A Meditation on the Contradictory Project of Academic Identity*' and I know I wasn't alone in being transfixed by this particular performance of academic identity. Resilience, again, came to the fore: for Tai herself in her current role, supporting significant curriculum change, but also amongst others subjected to institutional demands for such change. Beginning by acknowledging affinities and emotional engagement with some (rather than other) aspects of the history of ideas, this was an impassioned argument for holding on to what's important to each and every one of us. And maybe not just 'holding on': to be more explicit in the first place about why and how we craft our academic identities. Change costs – and threatens – and it remains a mystery how writings and thinking about responses to change are so often depersonalised. Giving us just a glimpse of how change is currently being handled at her own institution (an account, I'm sure, recognised by many), Tai reflected outwardly on the tensions inherent between the identities we choose and those that are thrust upon us. We were posed an intriguing thought to contemplate: amongst the conflict and contradiction that is the contemporary university, might our 'best practice' recipes militate against the 'excellence' that we are instructed to strive for? If such 'excellence' erases our underlying values and intellectual commitments, this seems likely. "Rooms are booked, unbooked and re-booked" Tai said, against a backdrop of gentle laughter. We all recognise this scenario, and ponder anew, as if the words contained in strategic visions will somehow untangle the contradictoriness of academic and learner identities.

Throughout the conference I went, of course, to those sessions that seemed most closely aligned to my own particular research interests. Much else was on offer too, and I am grateful to colleagues for providing their thoughts and reflections on talks that I could not attend. I do hope, however, towards the end of this piece, to do my best to draw together some threads to give those unable to attend a sense of the conference.

The largest proportion of papers presented at the conference fell under the theme of 'Academics' Identities'. I had wondered in advance if this was a symptom of the gathering pace of change in academic work, a thought supported in many of the talks that sought to emphasise values associated with university life. Resilience and care have been mentioned above, and will be returned to. But I intend to start with a third theme that I thought I had discerned in the abstracts submitted, that also went on to play a large role in the presentations: destabilisation.

Too often, it seems, decisions are made about the shape of a university, with such decisions' provenance lost somewhere in the bowels of bureaucracy. One day, however, such deliberations are communicated to those whom they fundamentally affect. In the stroke of a minute (and I mean the committee sort, rather than the temporal one) landscapes and horizons change, identities (and more besides, of course) are destabilised. This kind of change can hit very hard, and in a reflective but humorous account, Sue Morón-García from Coventry University in a talk entitled '*Managing Conflicting Identities: Personal Orientation vs. Role Definition*' shared her story from the sharp end. We can see from this account that whatever institutions think they want cannot simply be wished into being. Sue talked candidly about the clash of values as she found herself transplanted from an academic ethos in a centre concerned with the study of higher education to the alien environment of a human resources department. This perhaps points to a notion of hybrid identity, something taken up by Stuart Boon (University of Strathclyde) and Louisa Sheward (University of the West of Scotland) in their workshop exploring the roles and identities of educational developers. They too touched on how individuals' lives can be 'made hybrid' by institutional or role change, and aimed to provide a helpful resource to support those dealing with change.

Several contributions focused on the experiences of early career academics and here there was evidence of a tension between the public and private faces of academic identities. Kathryn Sutherland from the Victoria University of Wellington, in her talk, '*Constructions of "success" among early career academics*', spoke of an international project that shows early career staff have concerns that go beyond the performative agenda. Kathryn's suggestion that academic success be conceptualised beyond traditional markers of research output and 'profile' was echoed by Meegan Hall, also from the Victoria University of Wellington, who demonstrated that joining the academy can be destabilising for Maori academics as some academic and cultural values may clash. As universities globally pursue internationalisation strategies, we need better to understand, as Meegan reported, a wider range of cultural values and practices, and to see these reflected in institutional practices.

Initial and continuing professional development for academic staff provided a strong sub-theme, with academic/educational developers interrogating the experiences of those undertaking formal programmes. Sharon Markless, from King's College London, as part of a symposium on '*Academic Identities and Change*' demonstrated the empowering nature of CPD. As participants reflected on their professional practice, their current identities were destabilised, but ultimately re-stabilised through the process. As more experienced academics undertaking a module in 'Professionalism in Academic Practice', they were able to volunteer for this programme, and it was interesting to hear Sharon note that not everyone was keen for their participation to be publicly known.

In contrast to these more experienced professionals, newer academics are often subject to initial professional development demands. A teaching qualification is increasingly specified for new entrants to the profession, and Liz Cleaver and Sharon Buckley, from Birmingham University, reported on an evaluation of their PGCert in Learning and Teaching. Early findings show some positive impact on participants' practices and the aim of the evaluation is to feed in to further developing both the course and the institutional learning and teaching strategy. Rather than course evaluation, Holly Smith from University College London, in her talk, '*Constructing the "HE Teacher": a new identity for academics?*' drew attention to the competing discourses that can structure initial professional development courses for new academics. By presenting some persuasive evidence,

Holly showed how new academics will resist a 'competence discourse' and reject the identity of 'teacher', suggesting instead that an 'enquiry discourse' can lead to more productive explorations of academic identity for early career staff.

A strong sub-theme of the conference contributions centred on notions of emotions and values, and this bridged the staff-student division. I will touch just briefly here on some of them, as I was unable to attend as many as I would have liked. Barbara Grant, Auckland University, reported on work she and her colleague Vivienne Elizabeth, had undertaken in response to the New Zealand system of research assessment. As an individualised system of assessment, the exercise bestows on each academic their 'grade' (which equates to levels of government funding). Understandably, this is an emotive process. Focusing on the women in her study, Barbara demonstrated some gendered responses in line with Sue Clegg's keynote, but also a wider, resilient range of responses to the process. Susan Crozier, University of the Arts London and Clare Saunders, Higher Education Academy, both focused on the role of values in establishing resilient academic identities, through the use of psychoanalytic and philosophical approaches. Such approaches are perhaps less common in higher education research, but may prove to be useful tools to bring to explorations of the slippery concept of 'identity'.

Contributions to the learner identities theme formed the second largest cluster of papers. Here it was made more explicit the role of others in the process of identity formation for learners (which, on reflection, seemed mostly absent from accounts of work with/from staff). But this idea was also troubled, especially by Jenny Rodriguez's (University of Strathclyde) paper, *'International Students as the Other'*. International students, in the UK context, often find themselves reconstructing successful learner identities on terms that are not their own. Several other papers in the learner identities strand (Timothy Moss and Sharon Pittaway, University of Tasmania; Julie McAdam, University of Glasgow) would suggest that recognising – and even more importantly, valuing – prior experiences, and the conflicts these can sometimes bring, would be beneficial when considering the current mantra of 'the student experience'.

'The student experience', in and of itself, was a contested notion at the conference. In asking *'Who or what is a student'*, Christine Sinclair, University of Strathclyde, suggested that some who *are* students reject this identification. Christine also appeals to the notion of destabilisation: students must engage in certain activities in certain contexts; only then might identity issues become apparent, as the positioning entailed by certain activities makes students question whether this is the person they want to be. The increasing diversity of students' backgrounds, and outdated notions of what a student 'is', also play a role here, as Nuala Toman, Queen's University Belfast, showed in her talk entitled *'Diverse Students? Diverse Identities? Can conceptions of habitus and identity facilitate an understanding of learner experience within contemporary higher education?'* Nuala suggested that the influence of social and personal perspectives can be critical to the student experience, and that many students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds may not aspire to a student identity, preferring instead current constructions such as parent or partner. Taken together, these two papers may challenge our assumptions about who and what students are, and we can perhaps take comfort from the resilience they display to complete their courses.

Papers addressing issues for taught postgraduate students were in short supply at the conference, but this is not unusual. Little work seems to be carried out with Master's students, even though it

could be speculated that this might be a time of significant intellectual and identity commitments. Charles Neame, Glasgow School of Art, in his talk, *'PDP: meeting psychological needs to create a virtuous circle of personal development'* made a thoughtful argument towards privileging intrinsic motivation within PDP, rather than the (more common) instrumental approach. Rather than a skills/employability agenda, for postgraduates to benefit most from their courses, Charles argues that the potential for self-development through truly reflective PDP should be stressed. The second paper drawing on a taught postgraduate context was *'Posthuman academic identities in digital environments'* offered by Sian Bayne and Jen Ross from the University of Edinburgh. This paper crossed the boundaries between academic, learner and virtual identities, using as its core, an analysis of a fully-online course for adult learners using a wide range of distributed tools and a 'flattened' pedagogy. Teacher and learner are continuously enmeshed in constructing the course experience through novel uses of disaggregated technologies; as Sian and Jen suggest, this may be a productive model to experiment with assessment regimes.

I have foregrounded here the themes of destabilisation and resilience, to convey a sense of how it felt to me to participate in the conference. But other words keep making an appearance too: humour and laughter, for instance. And whilst the conference *was* a venue for examining and discussing change and its attendant discomfort for those who work and study in the contemporary version of the university, my overriding sense was one of hope. I leave the final impression to my review of the presentation given by Cate Watson, from Stirling University's Institute of Education. Cate entertained all who attended her session and I will confess, for the first time at a conference, I was left crying through laughter. There is very real hope for those who may be concerned that the neoliberal agenda will defeat the resilience, care and creativity of academics. The detailed analysis that Cate put forward from an autoethnographic approach shows that creativity and subversion are still open to academics, no matter the disquiet many currently feel:

Reading that 'the psychological health of staff seems to be a preoccupation of universities today' and that 'A Hefce-funded site says that investing in staff wellbeing can reduce absenteeism and staff turnover; it also cites a report that calculates a return of £4.17 for every £1 spent on staff wellbeing' (THE, 21.01.10, p.35), I visit our own wellbeing page and decide, in my anxious state, to sign up for a 'Lifestyle MOT'. Expecting a therapeutic discussion centring on excellence-induced stress etc, or maybe an Indian head massage (reportedly on offer at Roehampton University, UK), I am disappointed to be given nothing more than a superficial medical examination, and a warning that my academic accountability level is low and I am in danger of becoming transparent, if not redundant. (As if to reinforce this, today, while walking down the corridor to my office, the automatic lighting system fails to recognise me and I am left in darkness). (Watson, forthcoming).

The creativity and subversion employed by many speakers suggests to me that, whilst the language and rhetoric of contemporary higher education may feel inhospitable, the gaps in which to exercise autonomy still remain. This may be especially important in current circumstances, and it may be useful for those who set the direction of our institutions to consider our seemingly endless reluctance to be made over into people who do not care – for our students, our colleagues and our disciplines.

There were, of course, many more contributions to the conference than I was able to attend and/or summarise here. I am, therefore, grateful to my colleagues, George Gordon and Christine Sinclair, for their contributions to this review. The Academic Identities Conference was hosted by the Centre for Academic Practice & Learning Enhancement, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, from 16-18 June 2010. Abstracts are available from the conference website, <http://www.strath.ac.uk/caple/aic>

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Reference

Watson, C., (forthcoming), Accountability, Transparency, Redundancy: academic identities in an era of 'excellence', *British Educational Research Journal*